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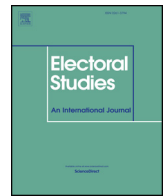
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# Coalitions in the news: How saliency and tone in news coverage influence voters' preferences and expectations about coalitions

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## ABSTRACT

Past research has shown that media coverage during election campaigns influences citizen preferences and expectations about parties and political candidates. Very little is known, however, about the effect of media coverage on post-electoral coalition preferences and expectations. This is surprising, given that speculations about post-electoral coalition building are an essential part of election campaigns in all multiparty systems. This paper investigates the consequences that coalitions' media saliency and tone have on voter preferences and expectations about these potential coalitions. Using media and panel data from the 2013 German and Austrian election campaigns, we find that media coverage has substantial effects on voter perceptions although the effects differ in strength between the two countries. These findings have important implications for our understanding of media effects, voter expectations and campaign strategies.

## 1. Introduction

Coalition governments are closely connected to elections under multiparty systems and represent one of the most important topics discussed during election campaigns in these systems (e.g., [Hobolt and Karp, 2010](#)). Recent studies have shown that coalition preferences and expectations influence voting behaviour and, as such, can have important consequences for election outcomes (e.g., [Bargsted and Kedar, 2009](#); [Blais et al., 2006](#); [Bowler et al., 2010](#)).

Motivated by these findings, research has started investigating how citizens form preferences on post-election coalition governments ([Debus and Müller, 2014](#); [Falcó-Gimeno, 2012](#)). Two recently published studies ([Nyhuis and Plescia, 2017](#); [Plescia and Aichholzer, 2017](#)) found that citizens' evaluations of coalitions enjoy a certain degree of independence from other objects of vote choice, including their constituent parties. A few attempts have also been made to explain post-electoral coalition expectations: in this regard, existing studies focused on the effect of party preferences and published opinion polls on voter expectations (e.g., [Faas et al., 2008](#); [Meffert and Gschwend, 2011](#)). To date however, the existing literature has largely overlooked the possible effect that media coverage can have on attitudes towards coalition governments. This lack of research is surprising, as most voters receive their impression of coalitions primarily from mass media ([Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002](#)), and electoral preferences and expectations are likely to be contingent upon media coverage ([Van der Meer, Hakhverdian &](#)

[Aaldering, 2016](#)). In fact, media coverage in the run-up to the election affects voters' preferences and expectations of the election outcome and may even impact their vote choice ([Faas et al., 2008](#)). Existing research has found conspicuous effects of saliency and tone cues in media coverage on preferences and support for parties (e.g., [Brettschneider, 2005](#); [Van der Meer, Hakhverdian & Aaldering, 2016](#); [Geiß and Schäfer, 2017](#)), but very little is known about the consequences of such cues on voter preferences for, or expectations about post-election coalition outcomes ([Strömbäck, 2012](#); [Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002](#)).

Against this background, this study represents the first attempt to examine the effect of media coverage on *preferences* as well as *expectations* over *post-electoral coalition governments*. The current study contributes to the existing literature in several important ways. First, we focus on a political object, i.e., coalition governments that have only received scant attention in the existing literature on public opinion and media effects. This is surprising since discussions about future coalition governments are an integral part of any campaign in multiparty systems ([Meffert and Gschwend, 2011](#)), and because media influence on coalition preferences and expectations can potentially be pervasive given that coalitions are a much more abstract construct compared to parties, which “are a real, physical entity, represented by candidates, organizations, messages and salient symbols” ([Meffert and Gschwend, 2012, p.4](#)).

Second, while most prior studies have considered only the effect of pre-election opinion polls on electoral expectations ([Faas et al., 2008](#);

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Meffert et al., 2011), we go beyond a focus on opinion polls and consider all cues in media coverage that are directly related to prospective coalitions. This is important because, although polls are an integral part of election coverage, they are not the only cues voters receive during election campaigns (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002).

Third, we focus on two main traits of the journalistic product, namely saliency and tone simultaneously as done by a few existing studies on party preferences (Hopmann et al., 2010), vote choice (Geiß and Schäfer, 2017; Geers and Bos, 2016) and candidate preferences (Eberl, Wagner & Boomgaarden, 2017b).

Last but not least, this study combines panel data with a comparative approach, which allows us to reduce, albeit not eliminate, the selection bias and causality issue, thereby strengthening our causal claim on how media coverage affects coalition expectations. Specifically, we rely on data from the German and Austrian parliamentary election campaigns of 2013, combining online panel surveys with media coverage of the most important newspapers in both countries. As such, this paper provides the first comparative study of the effect of media coverage on citizen expectations, tying the literature on media effects closely together with that on voter expectations, which have largely remained isolated from one another.

We find that even after controlling for structural differences across outlets and coalitions as well as individual-level differences, media coverage has substantial effects on voters' coalition preferences and expectations. The saliency and tone of media coverage have a somewhat stronger effect on coalition expectations compared to coalition preferences, in which case individual-level party predispositions appear to play a larger role. We also find important differences across the two countries when it comes to both media coverage and its effects.

Recognizing the importance of media coverage for voters' coalition preferences and expectations has consequences on our understanding of party strategy and political competition. To increase their perceived likelihood and, by that, eventually, their actual likelihood of being part of a governing coalition, parties can emphasize certain coalition options during the election campaign by sending clear signals to voters. Such strategies may reduce voters' hardship in deciding upon coalition majorities before the elections and lessen media influence in shaping expectations about post-electoral coalitions.

## 2. Sources of voter electoral preferences and expectations

The existing research on the determinants of coalition preferences and expectations has usually focused on the two separately.

Starting with preferences for post-electoral coalition governments, the literature has mainly examined the extent to which partisan attachment, ideological proximity and leader preferences influence coalition preferences. On the first aspect, it has been found that coalition preference follows, first of all, from party preference and long-term party identification (Plescia and Aichholzer, 2017). Moving to ideological proximity, in the Downsian framework, voters, parties, and candidates are assumed to hold positions in the ideological space and the utility of voters is determined by the distance between the voter and the political object, that being the party or the candidate (Downs, 1957). The few studies that have looked at sources of coalition preferences, find that the ideological distance between the voter and the overall position of the potential coalition also matters to explain coalition preferences (Falcó-Gimeno, 2012; Debus and Müller, 2014). In addition, attitudes towards the leader of the larger coalition partner (and future prime minister) have been found to bear disproportional influence on coalition preferences when compared to the preferences for the leader of the junior coalition partner. This may have to do with leaders of the main parties enjoying more visibility during the elections (Bowler et al., 2014).

When it comes to the sources of voters' expectations over post-electoral coalitions, the existing literature has made a broad distinction between individual-level and contextual-level sources. The first sources

are, as the term suggests, subject-specific and unlikely to change much over the course of an election. By far the most well-known and most studied form of subjective influence is long-term partisan affiliation. A partisan preference implies a strong directional motivation that favours preferred outcomes over disliked ones (Price, 2000). The so-called “wishful thinking” refers to the process by which citizens overestimate the likelihood of outcomes they prefer (e.g., Meffert et al., 2011, p.805). In other words, coalition expectations follow first of all from party preferences.

The second type of source is context-specific and should be similar across subjects within a specific context, given that it is based on shared, factual information available to all voters in that context. The most common piece of information on parties, candidates, and coalition post-electoral expectations available to voters during an election campaign are opinion polls (Brettschneider, 2005). Polls have become a prevalent feature of media coverage during national campaigns, providing voters with vast opportunities to learn rather sophisticated information about upcoming elections (Meffert et al., 2011). The evidence suggests that polls and media coverage of polls influence coalition preferences and may lead to vote-switching (Geers et al., 2018). They do so in particular, since the higher a coalition's standing is in the polls, the more likely that coalition is perceived by the voters, thus inducing strategic voting (e.g., Faas et al., 2008).

While some studies in this field focus on polls as mere reporting of numeral facts (Faas et al., 2008; Meffert et al., 2011), others acknowledge that polls are reported in the context of news stories, that they may include mediated coalition signals and that they are thus subject to media framing as well (e.g., Meffert and Gschwend, 2011; Van der Meer, Hakhverdian & Aldering, 2016). Nevertheless, Meffert and Gschwend (2011) do find a distinct effect of the mere numerical facts presented in polls that goes beyond additional signals presented in the corresponding journalistic interpretation and presentation of the polls.

## 3. Media coverage as a source for coalition preferences and expectations: hypotheses

Electoral preferences and expectations are likely to be contingent upon media cues since most voters receive their impression of politics and political actors primarily from mass media (e.g., Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002; Van der Meer, Hakhverdian & Aldering, 2016). When analysing the effect of media on voter attitudes toward political objects (e.g., candidates, parties or coalitions), two main media cues are of major importance: the *saliency* of, and the *tone* toward a specific political object (Eberl, Boomgaarden & Wagner, 2017a; Geiß and Schäfer, 2017).

Saliency refers to the visibility of political actors in news reporting. Political actors can be more or less salient in the media as they compete for media attention. Such visibility can help voters to gather important information on parties and candidates and may influence subsequent political judgments (Kiousis and McCombs, 2004), especially because voters tend to infer a party's political importance and quality from its media saliency (Miller and Krosnick, 2000). Tone toward a specific political object adds a qualitative aspect to media coverage by considering *how* that political object is covered in the media. The tone of media coverage “is important because it can provide the audience with templates for understanding politics” (Eberl, Boomgaarden & Wagner, 2017a, p.1128). Existing works on valence framing indicate that tone towards an object affects the evaluation of these aspects in public's mind (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2003).

Although not yet assessed in the existing literature, we expect media cuing to also be relevant for citizen evaluations and expectations of post-electoral coalitions. It is even possible that media effects are larger for coalitions than for parties and candidates. In fact, while parties, are real entities, represented by candidates, leaders, organizations, etcetera, coalitions are purely hypothetical with no current physical or

symbolic representation (Meffert and Gschwend, 2012). Voters may thus rely even more strongly on mass media coverage when they form their opinion about coalitions.

Starting with saliency, it has been shown that mere saliency of parties and candidates in the media has extensive effects on preferences for parties and vote choice (Oegema and Kleinnijenhuis, 2000). In particular, the exposure effect alone suggests a positive effect of frequency of contact with an object on the familiarity (Van Aelst, Maddens, Noppe & Fiers, 2008) and evaluation of this object itself (Zajonc, 2001). Likewise, the saliency of political actors in specific outlets is likely to skew audiences' judgments favourably toward these political actors and their electoral viability (Miller and Krosnick, 2000; Oegema and Kleinnijenhuis, 2000). As such, visibility is likely to have an effect on both post-electoral coalition preferences and expectations. Specifically, we hypothesize that: The more visible a coalition is in voters' media repertoire, the higher the voter preferences and expectations that this coalition will form after the election (*Hypothesis 1*).

Moving to tone, the tone of media coverage is important because audiences' inferences about candidate traits are rather automatically made from positive or negative descriptions in texts (see Druckman and Parkin, 2005). Existing studies show that positively valenced news favourably influences the evaluation of parties and candidates (e.g., Balmas and Sheaffer, 2010; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007). Nyhuis and Plescia (2017) find that the share of positive mentions of the coalition options among all evaluative mentions in the media during the election campaign has a positive effect on voters perceiving that coalition as more competent. This finding suggests that tone in the media tends to influence prospective coalition arrangements (see also de Nooy and Kleinnijenhuis, 2016). Hence, we hypothesize that: The more favourable the tone toward a coalition is in voters' media repertoire, the higher the voter preferences and expectations that this coalition will form after the election (*Hypothesis 2*).

#### 4. The two case studies: Germany and Austria

Comparative analyses are extremely important to assess the generalizability of media effects, but unfortunately still largely absent in the existing literature. While European elections are often used to study comparative media effects (e.g., Van Spanje and de Vreese, 2014), there is hardly any comparative research relating to national elections in different countries (Boomgaarden and Schmitt-Beck, 2016). Our study of Austria and Germany during the 2013 elections is an important contribution in this regard and a relevant addition to those few studies that have analysed media effects in multiparty systems (e.g., Hopmann et al., 2010; Eberl et al., 2017a, 2017b; Takens et al., 2015).

##### 4.1. The media environments

In both countries, media outlets generally refrain from taking clear partisan stances and communicating them publicly, such as in open political endorsements. Most media outlets explicitly state that they adhere to the standards of impartiality and diversity of opinions. Yet, differences exist.

Starting with Germany, the country has a prototypical democratic corporatist media system with strong public broadcasters and a historic alignment between parties and newspapers. Overall political parallelism in the press, i.e., the degree to which media content reflects distinct political orientations (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, p. 28), is above the European average but lower than in other European countries like Austria or France. Political parallelism in television news, however, is quite low and comparable to that typical for liberal media systems, such as in the Scandinavian countries (Lelkes, 2016). The Austrian media system is similar in many ways to that of Germany, but has a particularly high press circulation, a high level of readiness for political intervention and closeness between parties and media (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Although journalists exhibit ideal-typical journalistic

values concerning objectivity in reporting, political parallelism in the Austrian newspaper sector has been classified as slightly above the European average (Lelkes, 2016).

##### 4.2. The election contexts

In Germany, during the entire campaign leading to the 2013 elections, it was clear that the incumbent Chancellor Angela Merkel, leader of the Christian democrats (CDU), would again win the elections. Still, in terms of government coalitions, there was uncertainty over the outcome of the election. On the one hand, it was unsure whether the Liberals (FDP) would make it into the Parliament crossing the 5% electoral threshold. Consequently, the continuation of the then incumbent government between the CDU, her Bavarian sister the CSU and the FDP, was rather uncertain (Faas, 2015). The Social Democrats (SPD) were willing to form a government with the Greens. However, it was fairly unlikely that the two parties would obtain a majority of the votes on their own. The Left Party was certain to enter the parliament given their strong support in Eastern German states. Both the Pirate Party and the Alternative for Germany were unsure to gain representation, but all main parties declared their unavailability to enter in governments with them (Faas, 2015). Eventually, a (grand) coalition of Christian and Social Democrats formed after the elections.

The results of the 2013 Austrian national election were also far from certain beforehand (Dolezal and Zeglovits, 2014) and the parties contributed to this uncertainty by sending voters very few coalition signals. This is a common strategy of political parties in Austria. The center-left Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), and likely election winner, refrained from committing to any specific post-election coalition. The center-right People's Party (ÖVP) and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) also refrained from making explicit coalition statements, not wanting to rule out any possible coalitions after the elections. The Greens saw both the SPÖ and the ÖVP as possible coalition partners, clearly ruling out a coalition with the far-right party, the FPÖ. Attitudes toward two new parties, the NEOS (a liberal party) and the Team Stronach (led by a business tycoon), remained mostly ambiguous since it was not clear whether they would pass the 4% electoral threshold (Eberl et al., 2014). Eventually, again a (grand) coalition SPÖ-ÖVP formed after the elections.

#### 5. Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we will proceed with a secondary analysis of survey and media data provided by the interdisciplinary frameworks of the German Longitudinal Study (GLES) and the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES). Survey data come from online access panels, which were largely in line with the overall population, with minor discrepancies concerning age and education in Germany (Rattinger et al., 2016), and age and region in Austria (Kritzinger et al., 2016).

Media content in both countries was analysed using manual content analysis. The unit of analysis is the single article in Germany and the single political claim in the title, lead, and first paragraph of each article in Austria (Koopmans and Statham, 1999). For the following analysis only articles and TV reports in Germany and claims in Austria mentioning one of the coalitions were included, generating a subsample of 981 articles and TV reports in Germany and a subsample of 862 claims (in 203 articles) in Austria. The media data cover the 9 weeks prior to Election Day in Germany and the 6 weeks prior to Election Day in Austria.

For Germany, the media sample includes the six most important superregional quality newspapers (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Welt* and *Die Tageszeitung*) and the most widely read tabloid, the *Bildzeitung* (Rattinger et al., 2015a) as well as the four most important television news programs (*ARD Tagesschau*, *ZDF heute*, *RTL Aktuell*, *Sat.1 Nachrichten*; Rattinger et al., 2015b). By including both print and television outlets in the German



case we cover 89% of our respondents; in other words only 11% of the respondents to our public opinion survey use none of the ten media outlets mentioned above. The media analysis covers three coalitions: the center-right, incumbent coalition of the Christian Democratic Union and the Liberals (CDU/CSU-FDP), the center-left coalition of the Social Democrats and the Greens (SPD-GR) and the grand coalition (CDU/CSU-SPD).<sup>1</sup>

For Austria, the media sample was selected on the basis of circulation figures, genre, as well as national and regional distribution and includes the quality newspapers *Der Standard*, *Die Presse* and the *Salzburger Nachrichten*, the tabloids *Kronen Zeitung*, *Österreich* and *Heute* as well as the midrange newspapers *Kurier* and *Kleine Zeitung* (Eberl et al., 2016). Due to data scarcity, in the Austrian case, we cannot cover exposure to TV news as we do for Germany. While this is a limitation of our study, due to the fact that TV represents an important source of political information in Austria, only a very small percentage of respondents in our survey (around 9%) do not read any of the analysed newspapers (Kritzing et al., 2016). The media analysis includes coverage of the incumbent coalition SPÖ-ÖVP, the ÖVP-FPÖ, the SPÖ-FPÖ, the SPÖ-GR as well as the ÖVP-GR. Furthermore, two three-party coalitions were included; one between the SPÖ-ÖVP and the Greens (SPÖ-ÖVP-GR) and one between the People's Party, the Freedom Party and the Team Stronach (ÖVP-FPÖ-TS). Hence, the sample of covered coalitions in the Austrian data is more extensive than that in Germany, which only covers the three most likely and visible coalitions (see also below).

In Germany, content data was linked to the general population using wave 1 and wave 2 (both conducted prior to the start of the election campaign) and wave 6 (a few days before Election Day); similarly, for Austria, the content data was linked to the general population using wave 1 (conducted prior to the start of the election campaign) and wave 3 (a few days before Election Day). To sum up, media data covers large parts of the election campaigns.

### 5.1. Measurement of dependent and independent variables

The dependent variables are measured similarly in the two countries. For coalition preferences, respondents were asked about their preferences for each of the coalitions for which media content data were gathered, ranging from “certainly not preferable” to “very preferable” using an 11-point scale in both countries. For coalition expectations, respondents were asked about the perceived likelihood that a given coalition would form after the election, ranging from “certainly not” to “very certain”, using an 11-point scale in Germany and a 4-point scale in Austria.

Our key independent variables are media saliency and tone. Starting with saliency, a coalition is coded as present in a news article or television segment if it was among the first three actors mentioned (for the GLES data) or if it was a topic addressed in at least one of the analysed claims (for the AUTNES data). Hence, the media saliency for each coalition is based on the relative number of articles in which the coalition is present. However, we cannot simply use this relative number in our analysis. Some media outlets might generally leave less space for coverage about coalitions due simply to genre or format influences (Eberl et al., 2017a, 2017b). To be able to take into account differences between coalitions while considering media outlet specificities, we follow Druckman and Parkin (2005) and use the average saliency of all coalitions in each media outlet during the period of analysis as a benchmark. This measure captures whether a coalition's saliency is higher or lower in comparison to what is typical for that outlet. Therefore, our measure of saliency captures a deviation from the

average saliency that coalitions get in a specific outlet.

We measure media tone toward a coalition as an average based on expressions of support and criticism, as well as neutral statements at the article/segment level (on a five-point scale from  $-1$ ,  $-0.5$ ,  $0$ ,  $+0.5$  and  $+1$  for the GLES data) or claim level (on a three-point scale from  $-1$ ,  $0$  and  $+1$  for the AUTNES data). Tone is coded based on journalists' explicit statements on their coalition preferences, as well as citations or paraphrases of parties' coalition preferences. While statements about the likelihood of a coalition to form after the election would be coded as positive tone, a simple report of polling results would not suffice. Colloquial labels such as the “Ampelkoalition” (CDU/CSU-FDP-GR) or “Tigerenten Koalition” (CDU/CSU-FDP) were linked to the respective coalition but not coded as inherently evaluative. As with saliency, tone is then computed as the deviation of each coalition's specific tone from the average tone toward all other coalitions in that outlet. To ensure comparability between saliency and tone, both have been standardized to range from  $-1$  to  $1$ , where a coalition has a value of  $0$  when its saliency or tone is equal to the mean saliency or tone across all other coalitions in that media outlet.<sup>2</sup>

This data is then linked to voter data using voters' reported media consumption for each outlet during the election campaign (on a scale from  $0$  to  $7$  days a week and measured in the pre-election waves in both countries). We computed voter  $i$ 's content exposure (in saliency or tone) toward coalition  $j$  based on their use of different media outlets  $k$ :

$$\text{content}_{ij} = \frac{\sum_k (\text{use}_{ik} * \text{content}_{jk})}{\sum_k \text{use}_{ik}}.$$

As we do not expect content effects on voters who declared not having been exposed to any of the media outlets under study, we assigned these respondents a content exposure value of  $0$  (balance), to keep them in the analysis and account for a theoretically correct model specification.<sup>3</sup>

We add several control variables to our models. First, we should not expect all coalitions to be treated equally by the media. Some are indeed expected to be featured more in the news simply due to their news value. The most frequently studied campaign valence indicator is incumbency status (Carey et al., 2000) which grants an electoral premium independent of policy traits. To exclude such structural differences across coalitions (see also Eberl, Boomgaarden and Wagner, 2017a), we include in our models a dummy variable for incumbency status, which represents a shorthand indicator for a number of factors like news value and familiarity. Second, we control for variables, which the existing literature has shown are important to explain our two dependent variables. In this regard, we control for party preferences using the only available measure in both sets of data, that is, party identification and preference for the future chancellor. In the first case, we build a variable that for each coalition and each respondent takes a value of  $1$  when the coalition included the party for which the respondent has a party identification or  $0$  otherwise. For chancellor preference, we include a dummy variable for whether ( $=1$ ) or not ( $=0$ ) the coalition includes the most preferred future chancellor. Both variables are expected to have a positive effect on preferences and expectations (see Plescia and Aichholzer, 2017).<sup>4</sup> We also control for the standings of the coalitions

<sup>2</sup> Intercooder reliability scores (Krippendorff's  $\alpha$ ) for the German data, are based on a subset of articles ( $n = 145$ ) coded by eight coders. The scores for the identification of and evaluative statements toward the CDU/CSU-FDP, CDU/CSU-SPD and SPD-GR coalitions were  $0.83$ ,  $0.85$  and  $0.91$ , respectively. Reliability scores for the Austrian data are based on a subset of claims ( $n = 1123$ ) coded by seven coders. The scores for the identification of evaluative statements and topics were at  $0.67$  and  $0.72$ , respectively.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that excluding these cases or assigning them with an average saliency or an average tone (for each party and based on all respondents) did not substantially change the results. See the Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> A measure of party preferences is not available in the Austrian survey. Yet, a test for the German data using party preferences instead of party identification leads to the same conclusions.

<sup>1</sup> In 2013, among others, a possible coalition between the SPD, the Linke and the Greens was also discussed in the media. This coalition, however, was not asked about in the GLES survey and thus cannot be included in our analyses.

GERMANY					
START	ELECTION CAMPAIGN (9 weeks)				END
Survey data					
Wave 1 Party identification Education Political interest Gender Age	Wave 2 Chancellor preference*	Wave 3	Wave 4	Wave 5	Wave 6 Coalition preferences Coalition likelihood
Campaign attention (average) (waves 2-6)					
Media data					
Media saliency and tone (waves 2-6)					
Polling data					
Coalition standing in the polls (average) (waves 2-6)					
AUSTRIA					
START	ELECTION CAMPAIGN (6 weeks)				END
Survey data					
Wave 1 Party identification Chancellor preference Education Political interest Gender Age	Wave 2				Wave 3 Coalition preferences Coalition likelihood
Campaign attention (average) (waves 2-3)					
Media data					
Media saliency and tone (waves 1-3)					
Polling data					
Coalition standing in the polls (average) (waves 2-3)					

Notes: \*We decided to measure chancellor preferences closer to media data, as they may be more volatile than sociodemographic variables or party identification. These are not available in Wave 2 for Austria.

Fig. 1. Merging voter and media data.

in the opinion polls in interaction with attentiveness to the electoral campaign (see Faas et al., 2008).<sup>5</sup> Together with political preferences discussed above, the actual standing of the coalition should provide us with a good approximation for baseline citizen perceptions, against which we can assess the effects of media saliency and tone throughout the campaign. Beside this, we add standard controls such as gender (dummy for female) and age (in years). Political sophistication is rather difficult to operationalize and since we lack a measure of factual knowledge in the Austrian survey, we add to the models both respondent's education (to represent the cognitive skills components) and their political interest (to capture the political motivation component; see Lachat, 2007).

Fig. 1 provides detailed information on the timing of measurement of the different variables as well as on the different data sources. Importantly, as shown in Fig. 1, we address the issue of causality by measuring the dependent variables in wave 6 in Germany and wave 3 in Austria that is, at the end of the election campaign. Furthermore, all survey-based control variables are measured at the beginning of the election campaign and just before the corresponding media data, except for coalition standing in the polls and attentiveness to the campaign, which are averaged over several waves and thus the entire election campaign. Given that standing in the polls and attentiveness to the campaign remain pretty stable during the entire election campaign, substituting averages with standing in the polls or attentiveness to the campaign at the end or at the beginning of the campaign lead to almost identical results. The media data covers all political coverage between the survey waves 2 and 6 in Germany as well as between wave 1 and 3 in Austria.

## 5.2. Models

The test of both sets of hypotheses relies on linear regression models.<sup>6</sup> Since we expect saliency and tone to have effects on all potential coalitions and not only on particular ones, for both sets of models, coalition perceptions are combined ("stacked") and estimated

in a single model for each country.<sup>7</sup> In this dataset, each respondent contributes as many observations as the number of analysed coalitions that is, three in Germany and seven in Austria (note that due to missing values, not all respondents contribute the exact same number of judgments). As such, these judgments are not statistically independent from each other. In order to correct our estimates for possible errors introduced by the duplication of observations in the stacked data set, we employ linear regressions with clustered standard errors (respondents being the clusters).<sup>8</sup>

## 6. Empirical findings

Descriptive evidence shows that media outlets differ in their coverage of coalitions in the two countries in important ways. Starting with saliency and Fig. 2, in the German media, the bonus for the incumbent CDU/CSU-FDP coalition is very large, although a little less so for broadcasts and tabloids. In the Austrian media coverage, the incumbent (SPÖ-ÖVP) coalition and the main challenger (ÖVP-FPÖ) coalition got the highest media attention in most media outlets. Still, there were differences between outlets in respect to how strongly these coalitions were being overrepresented in comparison to other coalitions. The striking difference between the German and Austrian coverage is that in the former, differences between outlets are much less pronounced.

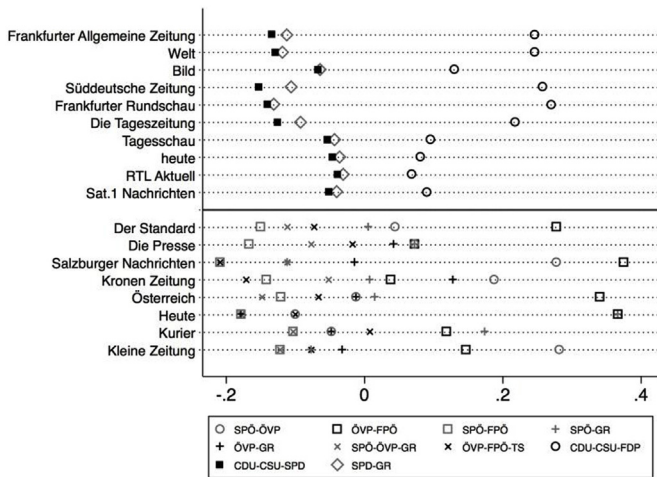
Moving to tone, Fig. 3 displays conspicuous variation between

<sup>7</sup> The reshaping changes the unit of analysis from respondents to respondent  $\times$  coalition. Some independent variables such as party identification, are already defined as respondent  $\times$  coalition specific relationships. Other variables like age are respondent specific. For this reason, some scholars suggest to re-conceptualise these variables as proximity measure. This procedure, however, creates coefficients that only express the importance of that variable in general and hence are not directly interpretable. This is the reason why we avoid this approach in the paper. However, the Appendix shows that our results are robust to this alternative specification.

<sup>8</sup> To test the robustness of our findings we also re-run our main models with standard errors clustered by respondents as well as coalitions (see Table A3). In addition, we re-run our models using a hierarchical analysis considering two levels of interest: individual $\times$ coalitions and individuals (see Table A4). The results in the Appendix support the paper's conclusions.

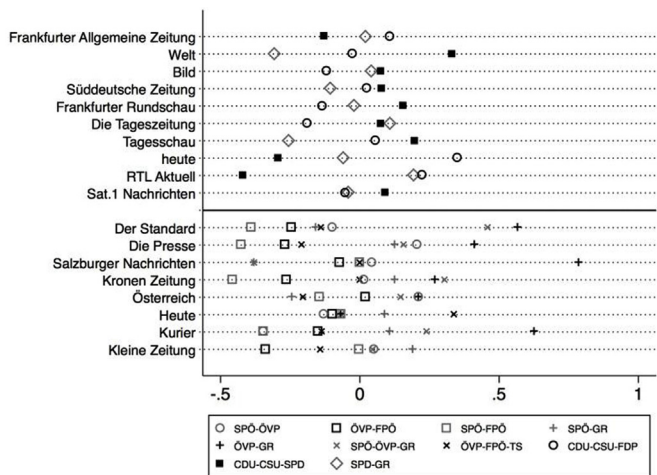
<sup>5</sup> Note that our opinion data do not ask respondents how attentive they were to polls but only to the general election campaign.

<sup>6</sup> Ordered logit yield to the same results.



Notes: The top of the graph shows values for Germany, while the bottom shows values for Austria

Fig. 2. Saliency of coalitions in news coverage.

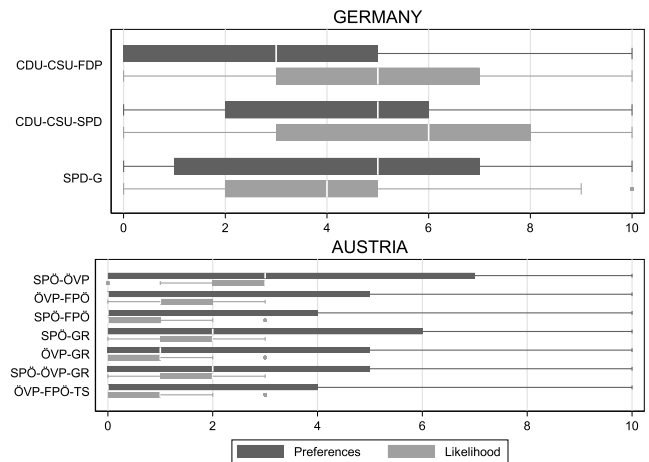


Notes: The top of the graph shows values for Germany, while the bottom shows values for Austria.

Fig. 3. Tone toward coalitions in news coverage.

outlets in both countries. In Germany, the conservative newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Welt* covered the CDU/CSU-FDP as well as the CDU/CSU-SPD more positively. *Die Welt* – Germany's most conservative quality newspaper – preferred a grand coalition between CDU/CSU and SPD to the incumbent center-right coalition between Christian Democrats and Liberals. *Die Tageszeitung*, arguably the most left-wing newspaper, shows clear preferential coverage for the SPD-GR coalition. For television news, we did not have any clear expectations concerning the political slant of the coverage. Austrian newspaper outlets appear to all have covered the ÖVP-GR coalition relatively more positively, similarly most outlets disliked the idea of an SPÖ-FPÖ coalition. Generally, results meet face validity, with *Der Standard*, for example, a liberal newspaper, portraying the two coalitions that include the Greens much more positively as compared to all the other coalitions.

Fig. 4 shows the average figures for the dependent variables (i.e., preferences and likelihood) for all coalitions included in our study. Among the respondents in our online survey, there are clear differences between coalitions, as well as between preferences and expectations for each coalition. In Austria, for example, the most preferred coalition is the grand-coalition between the SPÖ and the ÖVP, the one that is also the most likely according to the respondents. In Germany, the



Notes: In Austria, perceived coalition likelihood ranges from 0–3.

Fig. 4. Average preferences and expectations towards each coalition.

incumbent coalition between the CDU and the FDP is the least liked one while the other two coalitions are almost equally liked. Finally, in both countries, the eventual post-electoral governments (CDU-SPD, for Germany and SPÖ-ÖVP, for Austria) were perceived as most likely and these options were also among the most liked ones. We turn now to multivariate models to examine the extent to which differences in saliency and tone influenced voter preferences and expectations. Note that in the regression models below, we rescale coalition preferences and expectations for both countries to range from 0 to 1 to ease the interpretation of the results.

#### 6.1. Does media coverage influence coalition preferences and expectations?

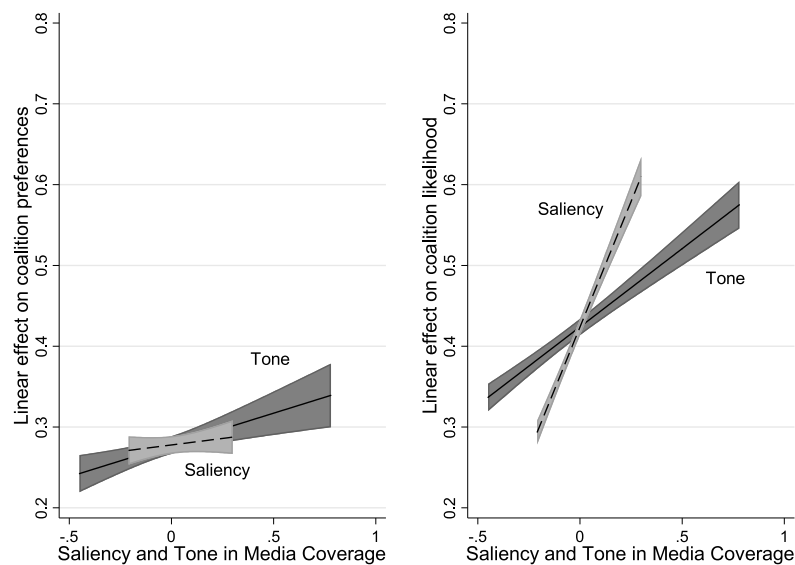
Table 1 presents the results for all regression models. Results show that in both countries, media coverage influences coalition preferences and expectations; although the effect differs between countries, as well as between our two dependent variables. Starting with preferences, Table 1 shows that saliency has a positive effect in Germany and negative in Austria but in both cases the coefficients do not reach conventional level of statistical significance. When it comes to tone, the more favourable the tone toward a coalition is in voters' media repertoire, the higher voter preference for that specific coalition. The effects are (much) weaker in Germany, where the effect of coalition saliency is positive but not significant. Moving to voters' expectations of which coalitions will form after the election (Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2), the effect of media coverage for both saliency and tone are positive. However, the effect is again much weaker in Germany compared to Austria. This is most probably due to the fact that media coverage data in Germany only covers highly salient coalitions, leaving little substantive variance between outlets (see Fig. 2). Generally, in such a stable media context, weaker effects should, in fact, be expected.

To interpret the size of the effects more directly we use plots. Starting with Austria, Fig. 5 shows a linear effect of saliency and tone on the perceptions of coalition preferences and likelihood, while keeping all the other variables at their mean values. The plot on the left of Fig. 5 indicates that while tone has a positive effect on coalition preferences, the effect of saliency on coalition preferences is almost 0 as indicated by the horizontal straight line. For likelihood, saliency and tone have an almost equal effect, with the effect of saliency being even larger than that of tone as showed by the steeper line in Fig. 5. Moving to Germany and Fig. 6, the saliency and tone have no effect on coalition preferences. Actually, it seems that tone has a negative effect on coalition preferences though this is not statistically significant. Concerning perceived likelihood, Fig. 6 indicates that both saliency and tone have

**Table 1**  
The effect of media coverage on coalition preferences and expectations: linear regression models.

	Germany				Austria			
	Preferences		Likelihood		Preferences		Likelihood	
	(M1)	(M2)	(M3)	(M4)	(M5)	(M6)	(M7)	(M8)
Media saliency		0.103 (0.084)		0.150 (0.081)		0.032 (0.031)		0.621*** (0.033)
Media tone		−0.036 (0.024)		0.101*** (0.026)		0.079*** (0.024)		0.194*** (0.017)
Coalition standing in the polls	−0.002*** (0.000)	−0.002*** (0.000)	0.001* (0.001)	0.001* (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)
Campaign attention	0.042*** (0.011)	0.039*** (0.011)	−0.042*** (0.014)	−0.042*** (0.014)	0.014 (0.031)	0.014 (0.023)	−0.100*** (0.027)	−0.102*** (0.027)
Standing × attention	−0.001** (0.000)	−0.001* (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	−0.000 (0.000)	−0.000 (0.000)	0.002*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.001)
Party identification	0.221*** (0.007)	0.221*** (0.006)	0.061*** (0.006)	0.061*** (0.006)	0.207*** (0.012)	0.206*** (0.012)	0.032** (0.010)	0.035*** (0.010)
Chancellor Preference	0.213*** (0.007)	0.213*** (0.007)	0.081*** (0.006)	0.081*** (0.006)	0.77*** (0.017)	0.078*** (0.017)	−0.005 (0.013)	−0.002 (0.013)
Education	0.012*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.003)	0.010** (0.004)	0.010** (0.003)	0.007 (0.007)	0.007 (0.007)	−0.004 (0.006)	−0.004 (0.006)
Political interest	−0.011** (0.004)	−0.011** (0.004)	0.014*** (0.004)	0.014*** (0.004)	−0.016 (0.010)	−0.016 (0.010)	0.008 (0.009)	0.008 (0.009)
Age	−0.000 (0.000)	−0.000 (0.000)	−0.001** (0.000)	−0.001** (0.000)	−0.001* (0.000)	−0.001* (0.000)	−0.000 (0.000)	−0.000 (0.000)
Gender	−0.009 (0.006)	−0.009 (0.006)	0.004 (0.006)	0.004 (0.006)	−0.004 (0.012)	−0.004 (0.012)	−0.017 (0.011)	−0.016 (0.011)
Incumbency dummy	−0.133*** (0.007)	−0.141*** (0.014)	0.084*** (0.006)	0.045*** (0.014)	0.109*** (0.011)	0.107*** (0.012)	0.473*** (0.010)	0.404*** (0.011)
Constant	0.404*** (0.026)	0.408*** (0.027)	0.284*** (0.031)	0.300*** (0.031)	0.230*** (0.050)	0.228*** (0.051)	0.371*** (0.054)	0.210*** (0.055)
<i>N</i> (observations)	9806	9806	9806	9806	5274	5274	5274	5274
<i>N</i> (individuals)	3113	3113	3113	3113	800	800	800	800
Adjusted R2	0.309	0.309	0.085	0.086	0.118	0.120	0.258	0.312
AIC	2486.6	2486.8	1616.8	1602.2	2553.9	2541.5	2065.2	1673.3

Notes: AIC = Akaike information criterion. To correct for each respondent being included several times in the data set, standard errors clustered by respondent are computed. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



Notes: Although saliency and tone have a theoretical range from -1 to +1, their empirical range – as shown in the graph – is from -.21 to .38 and -.39 to .79, respectively.

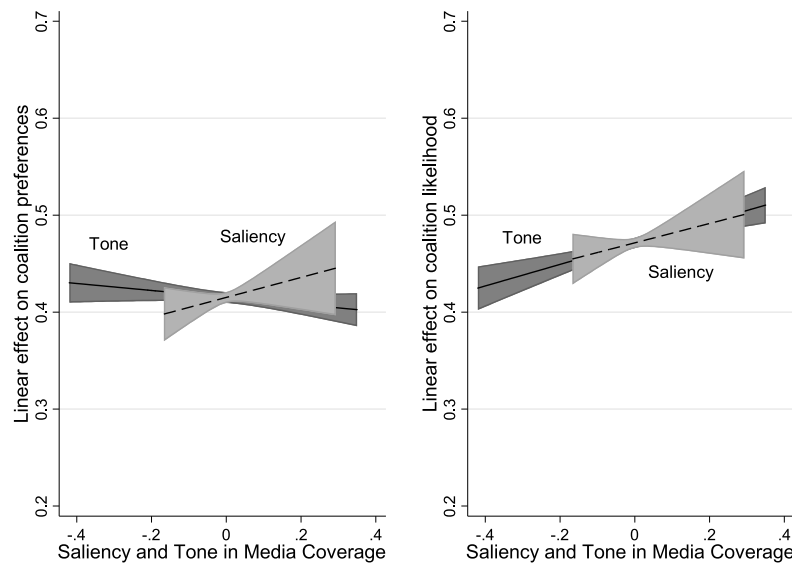
**Fig. 5.** The effect of media coverage on coalition preferences and perceived likelihood (predictive margins with 95% CIs): Austria.

the expected positive effect but the effect of tone is much larger and significant.

Turning to our control variables; the larger the coalitions' standing in the polls and the stronger the attentiveness to the campaign

(interaction in Table 1), the higher the perceived likelihood that the coalition will form after the election, which confirms the findings in the literature. Interestingly, the interaction has no effect on coalition preferences in Austria but is negative and significant in Germany, which





Notes: Although saliency and tone have a theoretical range from -1 to +1, their empirical range – as shown in the graph – is from -0.16 to 0.30 and -0.31 to 0.33, respectively.

Fig. 6. The effect of media coverage on coalition preferences and perceived likelihood (predictive margins with 95% CIs): Germany.

suggests that the actual standing of the coalitions in interaction with the attentiveness to this information has a very different effect on preferences than it does on likelihood. The incumbency effect is strong and consistent across most models; in other words, regardless of any other factors, the incumbent coalition is more liked and will be perceived as more likely by voters (see [Armstrong and Duch, 2010](#)). The important exception is the case of coalition preferences for Germany, where the FDP – the minority partner in the incumbent coalition – had lost support among voters, thus tainting the effect of the incumbency bonus ([Faas, 2015](#)). When it comes to political motivations, party identification for one of the parties included in the coalition as well as preference for the chancellor have consistently positive effects on preferences and expectations (albeit the latter is not significant in Austria). This would be in line with the discussed bandwagon effect. Beside this, age and gender have no effect while political sophistication is positive in both countries but only significant in Models 3 and 4 for Germany.

Survey data in Germany additionally allows for the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable (measured at the beginning of the election campaign). This ensures an even more conservative test of media effects. Importantly, by adding this lagged dependent variable, we obtain identical results, thus confirming that our models were already well specified for the task of measuring media effects on coalition preferences and expectations (see Appendix).

Overall, three main observations are noteworthy. First, our findings suggest that media coverage of potential post-electoral coalition governments during election campaigns has significant influence on citizen expectations. The relatively large media effects we find compared to the existing literature (e.g., [Bennett and Iyengar, 2008](#)) are most probably related to the fact that coalitions are rather an abstract concept compared to parties and candidates ([Meffert and Gschwend, 2012](#)), making it even harder for citizens to escape the media's grasp. In this regard, we see that media coverage has a larger impact on expectations than it does on preferences, which confirms past research arguing coalition preferences to be most strongly influenced by long-term factors like party affiliations, while expectations are more volatile and more likely to be updated over the course of an election campaign. Second, there are differences in terms of the effect of such media content being more pronounced in contexts where media outlets generally tend to take stronger stances toward politics (i.e., in Austria versus Germany). Third, testing the effects of saliency and tone in one model disentangles the

effects of each and underlines the importance of considering several dimensions of coverage when studying media effects during election campaigns.

Given that media effects may be heterogeneous, we also test for differences in media effect strength between groups of voters with low and high education and partisans and non-partisans. The results in the Appendix confirm the main findings of this paper. We also tested for a combined measure of media saliency and tone. Such interaction, while suggesting a multiplying effect of saliency on tone, has no substantive effect on the conclusions presented in this paper.

## 7. Conclusions

In multiparty systems, coalition agreements usually determine the orientation of governmental policy ([Laver and Schofield, 1998](#)). A number of recent studies have shown that voters are aware of the potential coalition alternatives when casting their ballot and coalition preferences influence voting behaviour ([Bargsted and Kedar, 2009](#); [Bowler et al., 2010](#)). But, how do voters form their preferences and perceptions about post-electoral coalition governments?

In this paper, we take on the task to investigate two sets of hypotheses related to media effects over post-electoral coalition governments. The first set of hypotheses relates to coalition preferences; the findings show that saliency and positive tone of coalition coverage may positively influence voters' preferences toward specific coalitions. However, these effects could only be shown in Austria. In a second set of models, we took a closer look at voters' perceived likelihood that a certain coalition will form after the election. The empirical findings of this section indicate that after controlling for structural differences across outlets and coalitions as well as individual-level differences, we indeed find evidence of media saliency and tone on said voter expectations. Here effects are much clearer in both countries. From our models it is clear that media coverage has a larger impact on voter expectations compared to preferences, the latter in fact appear to mainly be driven by individual-level party predispositions.

Broadly speaking, results in Austria were stronger than in Germany. This may be due to several reasons: 1) the German data was restricted to only the three most salient coalitions, resulting in a very conservative test; 2) the actual difference between outlets concerning coalition saliency was very small, leaving little leeway for media effects; 3) effects

may be context dependent, since, in German newspaper parallelism is weaker than in Austria (Lelkes, 2016). In sum, we expect the effect of media coverage on voter expectations to be larger, the larger the differences in coverage among different media sources.

There are several limitations with the present study on which future research should leverage on. First, our study was constrained not only by the quantity of survey questions and media data both countries' election studies provide, but also by their comparability. While Germany provided greater richness in media outlets, Austria provided richness in the number of coalitions coded. In future studies, other approaches in content coding may allow for more nuanced analyses of media effects (e.g., Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007); for example more extensive and fine-grained data could allow researchers to investigate party by party interactions in the media repertoire.

More broadly speaking, the prevalence of media saliency and tone effects during the last few weeks of an election campaign has strong implications for the role of media in democracy. While normative democratic theory demands citizens to be at least minimally informed, the political information provided by the media is not the same across all media outlets. As a result, the increase in media choice and fragmentation may lead to a less equal distribution of political knowledge, as well as to a polarization of the electorate concerning political preferences and expectations (e.g., Lelkes et al., 2015).

While our study does not deal with strategic voting in particular, our findings inform such analyses, as we now have a clearer picture of how media coverage may affect voter coalition expectations, which in turn may influence their voting behaviour. When it comes to party strategies during election campaigns and since voters seem to care about which coalition governments will form after the election when casting their vote (Faas et al., 2008; Meffert and Gschwend, 2011), parties can (and should) emphasize and openly commit to certain coalition options if they want to avoid misinformed voters or unfavourable media coverage. This is less true for centrist parties which in general have lower incentives in multiparty systems to commit to specific coalition governments compared to non-centrist parties. In fact, committing to specific pre-electoral coalition on either the right or the left, may lead to potential losses for centrist parties on the opposite side of the ideological spectrum. In this regard, party elites might also consider the position and preferences of leading newspapers or journalists when deciding about the next coalition government. In fact, if parties form a coalition that is not preferred at all by the major newspapers, they are likely to face critical media coverage, which could result in vote declines in follow-up elections.

Future research should replicate these findings with data from countries where contrary to Austria and Germany coalitions are a new aspect of politics. At the same time, we hope election surveys will collect better data about voters' expectations, including better measures of cognitive decision strategies. This would also be important given that the existing literature has shown that coalition preferences and expectations influence vote choice in general and strategic voting in particular (Plescia, 2016). Similarly content data should enable one to go beyond the generic measure of coalition coverage we have examined. For example, differentiating between statements from journalists', from parties belonging to the discussed post-electoral coalition and rival parties attacking that potential coalition, will allow a more in-depth examination of the individual-level mechanisms discussed in this paper.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2018.07.004>.

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